

The University of Chicago

THE SOURCES OF  
PRIMITIVE GNOSTICISM AND ITS  
PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF  
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED  
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY  
SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE  
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF NEW TESTAMENT AND  
EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

1933

By

PAUL STEVENS KRAMER

Private Edition, Distributed by  
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1936



The University of Chicago

THE SOURCES OF  
PRIMITIVE Gnosticism AND ITS  
PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF  
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED  
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY  
SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE  
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF NEW TESTAMENT AND  
EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

1933

By

PAUL STEVENS KRAMER

Private Edition, Distributed by  
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1936





Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2026

[https://archive.org/details/IA41548410\\_0029](https://archive.org/details/IA41548410_0029)



## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PLACE OF Gnosticism IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

The Gnostic heresies, so-called, have been a favorite theme of Christian apologists and historians in all ages of the Church. More anathemas have been hurled against the heads of the Gnostics than against any one real heresy. This is traceable to the dense ignorance that existed in regard to Gnosticism. The authorities on Gnosticism, chiefly Irenaeus and Hippolytus, have always been slavishly followed, and it seems to have been the characteristic of nearly all church writers from the second century down, to accept the dicta of their predecessors in the faith, as axioms. Modern church historians with but few exceptions are content to state the Gnostic tenets as they are recorded by Irenaeus or Hippolytus, together with the opinions of these early writers, without reservation. That the Gnostics, in the decline of their peculiar system of thought, incorporated into it distinctly Christian beliefs, may be true, but this was only done in order to bolster up a crumbling fabric. At the time when this occurred, Gnosticism had fallen into decay and was doomed. As an example of this we have only to cite the teachings of Bardesanes and Marcion who were not really Gnostics, but more properly Docetists, true heretics.

The supposed connection between Gnosticism and Christianity is traceable to the extreme rationalism that marked all schools of thought during the first and second centuries of the Christian era. This was not only true in Alexandria but also in

Rome, as the school of the Eclectics shows. This rationalism was the natural outgrowth of the failure of philosophy to satisfy the human mind with merely ethical teachings. The Religious Period of philosophy was, therefore, inevitable. A clear statement of a possible connection between the finite and the infinite was demanded. The intensity of this religious movement was shown by the eagerness with which foreign cults were received by the Graeco-Roman world, and the mingling of Oriental religions.

The establishment of Christianity presented a new and clearer method of knowledge concerning the world of the supersensuous. The Gnostics had constructed an elaborate system of spiritual powers for the purpose of bridging over the chasm between the world of sense and the world of spirit, in order to gain communion with God. But this connection was only apparent and not actual. How to supply the defect, was of the highest importance. The Logos doctrine of Philo furnished no solution. The Logos of Philo was a pure spiritual form, neither created nor uncreated, the vice-regent of God, the angel or archangel which delivers to us the revelation of God, the instrument by which God made the world, the *Ἀνμσρργς*. But the Logos was impersonal, which fact, together with the other attributes ascribed by Philo to it, made it impossible for the Gnostics to incorporate this conception of the Jewish philosopher into their system. The Logos of Philo could not furnish a rational connection between the material and the immaterial. The Gnostics in their study of the Logos theory of Philo must have reached a conclusion similar to that stated by Zeller:

The definitions which, according to the presuppositions of our thought, would require the personality of the Logos are crossed in Philo by such as make it impossible; and the peculiarity of his mode of conception consists in his not



perceiving the contradiction involved in making the idea of the Logos oscillate obscurely between personal and impersonal being. This peculiarity is equally misunderstood, when Philo's Logos is regarded absolutely as a person separate from God, and when on the contrary it is supposed that it only denotes God under a different relation, according to the aspect of this activity. According to Philo's opinion the Logos is both, but for this very reason neither one nor the other exclusively; and he does not perceive that it is impossible to combine these definitions into one notion.<sup>1</sup>

The Logos of Philo was, therefore, too incomprehensible, too far removed from the world, to be accepted by the Gnostics as able to round out their system. Parseeism, from which the Gnostics had freely borrowed, and from which their dualism received such strong support, could not supply the deficiency of the system. The Parsee mediator between God and the world, Zarathustra, for reasons opposite to those which hindered their acceptance of the Logos, would not answer. The Logos was too spiritual, Zarathustra too much like a man. The Logos dwelt too high, Zarathustra was of the earth. The Logos was impersonal, Zarathustra was too plainly and intimately connected with men, and, therefore, must lack a true communion with God. By the adoption of Zarathustra the chasm would not have been closed, but merely removed from the supersensuous to the sensible world. It would still remain an insuperable obstacle between God and his creation.

That Zarathustra was born of royal lineage, that he lived most probably in Bactria, that he was a religious reformer, is accepted by all scholars. The account given of him, both by Oriental and Occidental writers, is so barren of facts and full of legends, that we can really possess no reliable data concerning this remarkable man. We can only compare him with Sakyamuni,

---

<sup>1</sup>Zeller, Philosophie der Griechen, p. 378. Cf. Schurer, The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ (Edinburgh, 1885) Div. II, Vol. III, pp. 374-5.



the founder of Buddhism. Both were religious. Sakyamuni in his struggle against the corrupt Brahmanism of his time declared that the old religious literature of India was false; there are no gods, and hence no need of mediators between gods and men. After the death of Sakyamuni his followers ascribed divine powers to him, and he began to be worshipped as god, the Buddha.

Zarathustra fought against the ancient polytheism of his time, and insisted upon a monotheistic form of religion. Legends began to group themselves around his person and powers after his death, and he began to be revered and worshipped as the prophet and intimate associate of Ahura Mazda; he was a god. Through him also Ahura Mazda gave his revelation, the Avesta, to man. This latter seems to have been the claim of Zarathustra himself.<sup>1</sup>

The legendary accounts of Zarathustra did not come with sufficient authority to be received by the Gnostics, whose rationalism demanded that that only could be revived as reasonable which both appealed to the mind and also had back of it the consensus of reputable authorities.

Christianity was exerting a powerful influence upon the Roman world during the time of the Gnostics, and naturally attracted the attention of all thinkers. The inability of the Jewish-Alexandrine philosophy and Parseeism to supply the defect of their system, drove the Gnostics to seek for it in Christian dogma. They readily found in Jesus of Nazareth that for which they were seeking. Jesus was both perfect God and perfect man. As perfect man he lived amid the contaminating matter without being affected by it. He was superior to it and spurned it. But owing to his human nature he could also come in contact with man

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Ebrard, Apologetik, (Gütersloh, 1875) Vol. II, pp. 47-73; Spiegel, Iranische Altherumskunde (Leipzig, 1871) Vol. I, pp. 668-774.

and thus impart those characteristics that would make him acceptable to God. As perfect God he brought the spiritual into actual contact with the material, and thus joined the break that had existed between the Infinite and the finite. He solved the problem of dualism. The Gnostics, no doubt, saw the ideal of the sage so eagerly sought for by the Stoics, realized in Jesus, for Stoicism exerted a powerful influence upon all schools of thought during the times of the Gnostics. The Gnostics, however, could not accept the Christian teaching concerning Jesus as an article of faith. Their rationalism forbade this. So while they accepted the teaching they at once set about to explain the incarnation of God in Jesus.

Valentinus and his school, as we have seen, adopted the following explanation of the existence of Jesus. In order to quiet the discord which resulted from the passion of Sophia, the thirty aeons of the Pleroma projected one aeon, who should restore peace. This "Joint Fruit of the Pleroma" was sent out of the Pleroma into the Kenoma, and received from Achamoth and the Demiurge, the three forms of matter, spiritual, animal and vegetable, out of which the universe was created. The body which Jesus received, however, was of the same nature as that possessed by the Demiurge, uncorrupted by the evil actions of men. At his birth, therefore, Jesus passed through the Virgin Mary as water through a tube.<sup>1</sup>

The account in Hippolytus reads as follows:

And after, then, there ensued some peace and harmony between all the aeons within the Pleroma, it appeared expedient to them not only to have magnified the Son, but also that by an offering of ripe fruits they should glorify the Father. Then all the thirty aeons consented to project one aeon joint fruit of the Pleroma, that he might be a pledge of their

---

<sup>1</sup>See Irenaeus, Book I, Chap. 7, and above.

union, and unanimity, and peace. And he alone was projected by all the aeons in honor of the Father. This one is styled by them "Joint Fruit of the Pleroma." These things, then, took place within the Pleroma in this way. And the "Joint Fruit of the Pleroma" was projected, that is, Jesus--for that is his name,--the great High Priest. Sophia, however, who was outside the Pleroma, in search of Christ, who had given her form, and of the Holy Spirit, became involved in great fear that she would perish, if he should separate from her, who had given her form and consistency. And she was seized with grief, and fell into a state of considerable perplexity, while reflecting who was he who had given her form, what the Holy Spirit was, whither he had departed, who it was that had hindered them from being present, who it was that had been envious of that glorious and blessed scene. While involved in sufferings such as these, she turns herself to prayer and supplication of him who had deserted her. During the utterance of her entreaties, Christ, who is in the Pleroma, had mercy upon her, and all the rest of the aeons were similarly affected; and they send forth beyond the Pleroma "the Joint Fruit of the Pleroma" as a spouse for Sophia, who was outside, and as a rectifier of those sufferings which she underwent in searching after Christ.

"The Fruit," then arriving outside the Pleroma and discovering Sophia in the midst of those primary passions, both fear and sorrow, and perplexity and entreaty, he rectified her affections. While, however, correcting them, he observed that it would not be proper to destroy these, inasmuch as they are in their nature eternal, and peculiar to Sophia; and yet that neither was it right, that Sophia should exist in the midst of such passions, in fear and sorrow, supplication and perplexity. He, therefore, as an aeon so great, and as offspring of the entire Pleroma, caused the passions to depart from her, and he made these substantially-existent essences (*ὁμοστάτους*). He altered fear into animal desire, and made grief material, and rendered perplexity the passion of demons. But conversion and entreaty, and supplication, he constituted as a path to repentance and power over the animal essence, which is called right<sup>1,2</sup>

And, further on:

When, therefore, the creation received completion, and when after this there ought to have been the revelation of the sons of God--that is, of the Demiurge, which up to this had been concealed, and in which obscurity the natural man was hid, and had a veil upon the heart;--when it was time, then, that the veil should be taken away, and that these mysteries should be seen, Jesus was born of Mary the Virgin, according to the declaration in Scripture, "The Holy Ghost

---

<sup>1</sup>Valentinus calls what is psychical (natural) "right," i.e. the Demiurge, being the power of the psychical essence.

<sup>2</sup>Hippolytus, Bk. VI, chap. xxvii. See also Irenaeus, Bk. I, chap. 7.



will come upon thee"--Sophia is the Spirit--"and the power of the Highest will overshadow thee,"--the Highest is the Demiurge,--"wherefore that which shall be born of thee shall be called holy." For he has been generated not from the highest alone, as those created in the likeness of Adam have been created from the highest alone--that is, from Sophia and the Demiurge. Jesus, however, the new man, has been generated from the Holy Spirit--that is, Sophia and the Demiurge--in order that the Demiurge may complete the conformation and constitution of his body, and that the Holy Spirit may supply his essence, and that a celestial Logos may proceed from the Ogdoad being born of Mary.<sup>1</sup>

Thus it was possible for Jesus to remain in communion with the aeons of the Pleroma. The supplementary aeons, Christ and the Holy Ghost, again descended upon Jesus at his baptism.<sup>2</sup>

Basilides, Saturninus and Carpoocrates held the same doctrines with slight modifications.<sup>3</sup>

All the efforts of the Gnostics seem to have been concentrated upon the attempt to make Jesus a member of the Pleroma. That this was an after-thought is seen from the contradictions in which the Gnostics became involved. The number of the aeons comprising the Pleroma was complete; all possibility rested in them, and the need of an addition to the number could only have resulted from contact with a new mode of thought. The popularity and wide-spread influence of Christianity seemed not only to presage for it universal acceptance, but also showed that it possessed elements of truth that could not be disregarded by its most pronounced opponents. The Gnostics, ever on the alert to find a remedy for the defect in their system, seized upon the Christian teachings concerning Jesus, and modified them to suit their purpose.

This is apparent when we contrast the Gnostic and

---

<sup>1</sup>Hippolytus, Bk. VI, chap. xxx.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., Bk. VII, chap. xxxi and xxxii.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., chap. xiv-xvi; xx.



Christian schemes of redemption. Both agree in the basic assumption that in the world in which we live goodness, truth and beauty are everywhere thwarted in their expression by the power of evil. That a fallen angel brought confusion and evil into a world of perfect goodness, is the familiar Christian view. The Gnostic view is quite the opposite of this. The world is fundamentally evil, and to this evil world a fallen aeon brought a spark of light and goodness. The fall of this aeon is variously described in the different systems. It is explained in some as due to a weakness which this aeon (which was the furthest removed from God) possessed, and which made it unable to remain in the Pleroma; in other systems, sinful passion forced this aeon into the Kenoma. At any rate, however it came to be, the aeon fell and is imprisoned in the Kenoma and longs for return to the Pleroma.

Redemption is, therefore, essentially cosmical. It consists in the return of all things to what they were before the fall of this aeon, Sophia, brought matter into existence and imprisoned the spark of Divine Light in it. This setting free of the light spark is the process of salvation. When it is fully accomplished, the evil matter will be burnt up. According to Basilides, it is the third Sonship that is imprisoned in matter, and it is now being saved, for a knowledge of its existence has been given to the first Arohon, and also to the second, and to each of the others by his respective son. Jesus, the son of Mary, it is added, died to save the third Sonship. In what way his death brings this about is never elucidated.

The process of salvation is very much elaborated by Valentinus. After the creation of the world, in consequence of the fall of Sophia, Nous and Aletheia, by the command of the

Propator, produce two new aeons, Christ and Holy Ghost, which restore order in the Pleroma, and the result is, as we have seen, that all the aeons together produce a perfect aeon, Jesus, Soter, whom they offer to the Father. The aeon Christ, having pity on the abortive substance, born of Sophia, gives to it essence and form. The most perfect aeon now descends and after great suffering leads back the rebellious or fallen one to the Pleroma, where he unites with her in a spiritual marriage.

This process of redemption though basically cosmical, is, however, made applicable to individual souls. The aeon Jesus, Soter, according to Valentinus, is sent again as a second Saviour, unites himself to the man Jesus, the son of Mary, at his baptism, and becomes the Saviour of men. Man is the creation of the Demiurge, and is compounded of soul, body and spirit. His salvation consists in the return of his πνεύμα to the Pleroma. If, however, he is not a full Gnostic, his ψύχη shall return to Ahamoth. Thus, the Saviour imparts to the true "Gnostic" a knowledge of the higher world, and inspires him to seek after it. Further teaching furnishes the initiate with means by which he may thwart the attacks and influences of hostile spirits which everywhere confront him and seek to destroy his soul. All sorts of sacraments, rites, sealings, piercing of ears, etc. are enjoined for this purpose.

It is everywhere apparent, throughout this whole scheme, that there is no discernible likeness between the Gnostic Σωτήρ and the historical Jesus.

The redemption of the fallen Aeon by the Soter has nothing to do with a historical appearance on earth and in time. The Gnostic redemption-story is a myth, an allegory, not an historical narrative. But under the influence of Christianity, laborious attempts were made to bring this soteriology into union with the Christian account of the

historical Jesus. The attempt was not a success. "In this patchwork, the joins are everywhere still to be recognized." (EBr Vol. xii, 157a) Indeed some Gnostics made no secret of the difference between their Soter and the Christ of ordinary Christians; this Soter was for Gnostics alone, Jesus Christ for 'Psychics' (Iren. I, vi, 1). The fact that one school required its members to curse Jesus is not without significance in the same direction. The most probable view is that Gnosticism in all its elements was independent of Christianity, but strove to throw over itself a Christian guise, and represent itself as a fuller Christianity. But even the most minds which formulated the great systems of the 2nd century were baffled to conceal effectively what could not be hidden, the essentially alien nature and origin of their speculative flights.<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact, the Gnostic Saviour does not save. There is no idea of atonement in Gnosticism. There is no sin to be atoned for, unless ignorance be so considered. The suffering of the so-called "Saviour" in no way benefits man. Nor does he in any way infuse into the individual any power or grace to draw him to God. He appears, really, as a teacher of truth, the mere possession of which, it would seem, can save. Of the Christian idea of a real Saviour who, possessed of divine and human love, seeks out sinners to save them, Gnosticism knows nothing.

Again, the Gnostic Saviour has no human nature; he is an aeon, he only seemed a man. The aeon Jesus is, moreover, brought into the strangest relationships to Sophia. Though in the Valentinian system he appears as her spouse, in others he is often her son, and in others again her brother. Sometimes he is identified with Christ, sometimes with Jesus; sometimes Christ and Jesus are the same aeon, sometimes they are different; sometimes Christ and the Holy Ghost are identified. Gnosticism tried desperately to utilize the Christian teaching concerning the Holy Ghost, but apparently never quite succeeded. In some systems the

---

<sup>1</sup> W. C. Niven. "Gnosticism," in James Hastings (ed.) Dictionary of the Apostolic Church, I, 455.



Holy Ghost is the Horos, ὅρος , or the Μεθόριον Πνεύμα, the limiting power or Boundary Spirit; again he is the Sweet Odour of the second Sonship (Basilides), or a companion aeon with the Christ, etc., etc. In some systems he is entirely left out.

Finally, it must be borne in mind that Jesus is never the central feature of Gnosticism, as he is of Christianity, but only a link in the chain, important it is true, but possessing powers that are less than any of the aeons of the Pleroma. He was, in fact, projected, conceived by the joint efforts of the aeons, but formed by the Demiurge, who himself could not enter the Pleroma. To the Christian Jesus is God, to the Gnostic he was merely a power or emanation from God. The later Gnostic literature seems to furnish evidence of a bold attempt to enhance the importance and role of Jesus in a system of thought which really recognized no need for him, and the result is a fantastic and fanciful picture which is positive proof that Gnosticism had run its course and that its disruption had begun.

The above assertions have received strong confirmation in the recent researches of R. Reitzenstein on the ancient "mystery-religions," and the theosophic speculations that arose from them. In his studies entitled Poimandres and Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen, Reitzenstein has attempted to seek after the origin of the "gnosis" idea. In 1843 in his Histoire critique du Gnosticisme, Matter had concluded that Gnosticism is to be described as an amalgam of Christianity with Greek philosophy and miscellaneous theogonies. An advance on this position was made by Lipsius, who in his Ursprung und Entwicklung des Gnosticismus, concluded that the "gnosis" was fundamentally Oriental, and in this was probably right. He proceeded, however,

to maintain further that it was a spontaneous development from Christian data, and traced its non-Judaic and non-Christian elements to Phoenecian and Syro-Chaldaic polytheism. In this, Reitzenstein believes him to be mistaken. The gnosis idea in itself, so Reitzenstein holds, is to be traced as far back as the period of the first Persian Empire. Many of its elements were drawn, he believes from that mass of Egyptian compositions concerning philosophical and theosophical matters, known as the "Hermetic" literature. This being the case, it is concluded that the nucleus of the general "gnosis" idea had taken form in the early years of the first century of our era, and derived nothing at the start from Christianity. In its essence "gnosis" was not primarily search for truth, scientific or philosophical. The phrase was, in full, γνῶσις θεῶν, and the objects of this "knowledge" were such things as material prosperity or protection from demons. A safe passage into the invisible world would be secured by means of sacred formulae, like those of the old Egyptian religion. This, according to Reitzenstein, is the root idea back of the term "gnosis," and however much we may disagree with his general conclusions, this much is certain, namely, that his studies do give strong confirmatory evidence for the assertion that Gnosticism (as developed into a religio-philosophic system by Valentinus, Basilides, etc. whom we have designated as "primitive gnostics") is non-Christian in essence and fundamentally alien to the Christian scheme.

The primitive Gnostics, therefore, cannot be justly called Christian heretics. The word "heretic," moreover, means a "self-chooser," one who perverts an established belief and changes it to suit his own mental conceptions as to what he thinks that

belief ought to be. This definition demands that the person who so perverts a belief first acknowledge himself as one holding the belief. No Gnostic leader ever acknowledged himself a Christian; no Christian writer of the first four centuries ever asserted that the Gnostics were Christian. A Gnostic cannot, therefore, be called a heretic.

Even though it could be established that some of the individual Gnostics were professed Christians, this would not militate against the above assertions. It was no uncommon thing in the time of the Roman Empire for a man to become a member of a certain cult in order to discover the mysteries connected with it. In modern times men have become Mohammedans solely for the purpose of penetrating into the secrets of the holy city, Mecca (e. g. Burton). It is not unreasonable, therefore, to say that if Gnostics became Christians it was merely for the purpose of learning more accurately Christian beliefs. This step was almost a necessity during the time of the Gnostics to enable them to get any reliable information whatsoever, owing to the merciless persecution which the Christians suffered at the hands of the Pagans, from Nero to Diocletian.

From a study of Irenaeus and Hippolytus one receives the impression that the Gnostics founded those parts of their system which correspond in any way whatever to Christian beliefs, upon a study of Holy Scripture, and especially the New Testament. It is true that the Gnostics had the Septuagint at their disposal, but it is highly improbable that they possessed any accurate knowledge of the New Testament.

Valentinus died, according to Massuet, in 158. His system was probably completed about the year 140. We have no absolute knowledge of the existence of the Greek Testament as early as

this. Portions of it no doubt were in use in the different churches. Quotations in Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Justin Martyr, show this. The general opinion is, however, that the New Testament canon did not receive its present form until the third century. The statements of Irenaeus would, however, lead us to believe that Valentinus and other Gnostics were intimately acquainted with the whole of it. That they may have had knowledge of parts of the New Testament is probable, and that these were parts of the Gospels is very likely, since the account of the life of Jesus together with his acts, was first distributed among the churches. The fact, also, that the Gnostics borrowed chiefly from the life of Jesus would thus explain the source of their Christian knowledge.

The use that the Gnostics made of the Old Testament is explainable from their dependence upon Philo. Philo sought by an allegorical exegesis to establish its supremacy over Greek philosophy. The fact, also, that the Christians used the Old Testament in their worship, especially the Psalms, would give to it, in the eyes of the Gnostics, a certain value as a Christian authority. Since, moreover, they had found in Jesus the embodiment of the idea necessary for the completion of their system, they would naturally try to read into the text of the Old Testament such meanings as would seem to give authority to their own peculiar teachings in the opinions of Christians.

We conclude, therefore, that the primitive Gnostics were a school of rationalistic philosophers. Their system was built up by a combination of Greek philosophy, Oriental speculation and Jewish-Alexandrine thought.

Although Gnosticism at first sight appears as a thought-



less syncretism of Greek philosophical systems and religious speculation, its development from a distinctly philosophical basis is most naturally accounted for when one considers the underlying trend of speculative thought through Plato. In the period before the Sophists, who represent the transition to the Socratic philosophy, there are two clearly distinguished sub-periods. The earlier thinkers stood in a very close relation to the previous religious and mythical views, and sought to substitute an intelligible hypothesis, based on real things or events, for the myths of the poets. In doing this it was their method to fix upon one conception of fundamental importance, and they were forced to maintain it in often a one-sided manner. The later thinkers were not so bound by mythological conceptions, and merely attempted to adjust and to accommodate the more valuable elements in the earlier views. There is also to be noted in these successive periods, a distinction in the religious views which were influential at the time. The earlier thinkers were largely controlled by the Olympian religion, which concerned chiefly the deities of the sky, earth and ocean. The worship of the Orphics and of the Eleusinian mysteries, on the other hand, emphasized the immortality of the soul and its need for purification; thus directing the thought within and introducing a distinction which had most important consequences. This religion influenced especially the Pythagoreans and Plato.

The extant myths which described the generation of the gods and the origin of the universe, all implied a single connected process, and an inclusion of everything in the universe within that process. Present, actual phenomena, such as sky, sea, days and seasons were unified in such beings as Uranus (heaven) and Gaia (earth) or Dionysius. The earlier philosophers were

concerned to substitute actual concrete substances for these personifications. It was assumed by all, that the world is one. The questions to be answered therefore, were, "From what did it come?" "What is the primal substance, the essential nature of things?" The answers were various; Thales said "water"; Anaximenes, "air"; Anaximander, "the boundless" or "infinite."

Into this almost wholly philosophical speculation, there was now introduced a distinctly religious element by the Ephesian Heraclitus. For him, the primal substance is "fire," of which all things are transformations. Now fire is a changeable thing, and to say that it is the ultimate nature of things, is to imply a process of change or flux, in which there is a "way downward," in which fire is transformed into things, and a "way upward," in which things are becoming fire. There is implied, further, a principle of rational law ( $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ ) or justice ( $\delta\iota\kappa\eta$ ) which controls the process. The law of change thus conceived by Heraclitus gave a union of the "one" and the "many."

The problem of the "one" and the "many," "permanence" versus "change," occupied the minds of the Eleatics and the Pythagoreans, though the latter were far more religious and ethical than speculative. There was usually, however, an over-emphasis on the first term of the antithesis, i.e. "the one." It was the work of Empedocles, Anaxagoras and the Atomists to combine these two terms in mediating theories. Certain elements are assumed to be permanent, and change, or the apparent arising and disappearing of things, is attributed to re-arrangements of these elements. To explain the re-arrangements, Empedocles and Anaxagoras introduced other elements which acted as forces, though they were not considered purely abstract forces. These were, for Empedocles, Love and Strife; for Anaxagoras the combining element

was Nous, which ordered all things intelligently. With the succeeding philosophers a mediating theory of natural processes reached a clear formulation, and it was developed inevitably into a system of materialism. The influence of these thinkers upon the speculative thought of the primitive Gnostics has been pointed out, earlier in this discussion.

With the Sophists and particularly with Socrates, philosophy takes on a much broader outlook and attempts to become practically applicable to the art of living. There is in Socrates a thorough appreciation of the social, political and moral life of the Greek city-state and the consequent attempt to discover eternal principles which may guide the individual in his daily life. In the Dialogues of Plato ethical, theoretical and artistic elements are all combined to give a new view of the world and a new interpretation of human experience. The religious conception of immortality and of the "other world" is introduced to give an answer to the demand for a distinction between the relative and the absolute, between the changing and the permanent, and a metaphysical system is constructed embodying all these elements. The result is a clear out dualism. The impact of the Platonic philosophy, as mediated through Philo, upon the minds of the Gnostics is, as we have seen, unquestionable, especially as regards their cosmogony.

Shortly after the period of Plato and Aristotle the influence of the Oriental religions upon all forms of thought became tremendous. The immediate result was an almost universal confusion. All faiths and philosophies of the world were meeting, and attempts were being made on every hand to establish by syncretism a universal system. Gnosticism, as we know it, owes its being to this syncretism. Its primary impulse was, however,

philosophical rather than religious. It was an answer to the problem, into which all philosophies which aimed at being applicable to human living had been resolved, namely, "Whence comes evil?"<sup>1</sup> This led to another question, "What is the origin of the world?" Oriental thought identified the two. The existence of evil was involved in the origin of the world. A full explanation of the one would include an explanation of the other.

The Gnostics believed that an answer could be given to these questions by proceeding by a thoroughly rationalistic method. So they set out on their speculative adventure. Their underlying motive was most practical. They believed that "knowledge" was power. They were convinced that it was not merely an agent for measuring values but itself a value, the most important element necessary for a perfect life of happiness, and a guarantee of everlasting bliss. Possession of γνῶσις would in itself make it possible to overcome the evil inherent in a material world of existence and give promise of a blessed immortality. It was inevitable that their beliefs should express themselves in cult and ritual. What forms this took with the great Gnostics and their closest disciples, it is impossible to say. Practically all of our knowledge regarding Gnostic worship is confined to descriptions of rites and ceremonies which were clearly the possession of lesser Gnostics, and which appear when Gnosticism as a system of thought had broken down. It is utterly inconceivable that such great minds as those of Basilides and Valentinus should be concerned with the magic, weird names, sounds, gestures and actions, etc. which characterized the ritual observances of their lesser disciples, nor is there any evidence that they were.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Tertullian Haer. vii.1; Eusebius HE v. 27  
Epiphanius Haer. xxiv. 6.



Why, then, did the great Gnostics fail of their purpose? They failed because, confining themselves to purely speculative reasoning, they inevitably reached an impasse. It was found impossible, rationally, to bridge over the chasm which separated the infinite from the finite. They instinctively felt that union with God must somehow be secured to make possible a complete redemption from the power of evil inherent in that which is essentially material, and proceeding from their premises it was impossible to accomplish this. As their skillfully fashioned fabric began to crumble they seized upon the Christian conception of Jesus, as a being possessing a nature both human and divine, to solve the problem of their dualism. But, as we have seen, their rationalism forbade their acceptance of the Christian idea as an article of faith and its whole conception was clearly opposed to their fundamental point of view. Thus, the necessary union with God was impossible, and Gnosticism, both as a philosophical system and as a way of life, was doomed.

It is difficult to determine what specific service Gnosticism rendered to Christianity. Several things, however, are clear. In the first place, it forced the Church to determine what writings were to be regarded as authoritative, as against the Gnostic schools, each with its own pretended special revelation. Secondly, it compelled the Christian body to seek for a just view of the relation of Judaism to Christianity, and of the permanent value of the Old Testament writings, which Gnostics commonly rejected. Thirdly, and most important of all, Christianity was forced to assume a definite attitude toward the complex philosophical problems to which, indirectly at least, it had given rise. Faced with this problem, some minds in the Church, looking upon the failure of Gnosticism as a clear indication of the

worthlessness of all philosophy not Christian, were more or less hostile to the introduction of the rational element into the Christian mental life. Others favored an effort at reconciliation, and set themselves to the task of working it out. The result was that Christian thought of the first four centuries was divided into two schools, the African and the Alexandrian, according to the respective attitudes assumed towards the incorporation of pagan philosophy or its attempted assimilation to Christian teaching.







